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CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

- HAVE A NICE DAY by Michael Kinneman 108

SHORT STORIES

BAG OF BONES by Frank Sisk	2
FAT MAN'S CLUB by Allen Kim Lang	19
LET'S GO TO A FUNERAL by James Michael Ullman	28
KING'S INDIAN DEFENSE by George C. Chesbro	35
WHEN THE SHERIFF WALKED by Jack Ritchie	49
I'M BACK, LITTLE SISTER by William Brittain	58
BIG SCORE by Lawrence Wasser.....	71
JUSTICE DRAGS HER FEET by Patrick O'Keeffe	78
GET THE MESSAGE? by Gil Stern	90
THE ULTIMATE PREY by Talmage Powell	97

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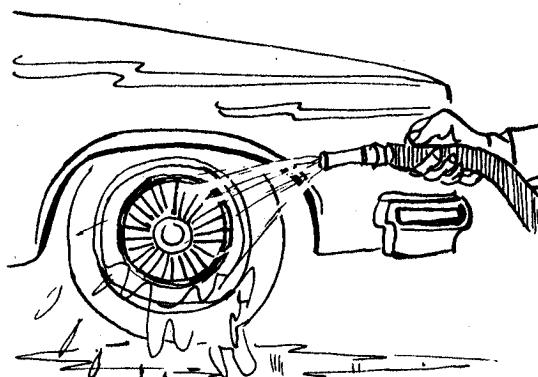
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A few new connections may ease things considerably for women and horses.



When the Sheriff Walked



by Jack Ritchie

Joey Lee is—or was—about five-foot-ten, had short brown hair, a small scar right under the left earlobe, and weighed a hefty one hundred and seventy pounds.”

WHEN THE SHERIFF WALKED

Hefty? I regarded one hundred and seventy pounds as lightweight.

The counterman continued. “But I suppose L.K. gave you a snapshot?”

“No,” I said. “And I don’t even know who L.K. is.”

He smiled wisely. “Joey Lee’s father, L.K. Williams.”

So Joey Lee’s last name was really Williams? I had thought it was Lee.

The counterman refilled my mug of coffee. “L.K. has this New South Cafe in Cumberdale. That’s about sixty miles due east, where Joey Lee originally come from.”

He looked up as the door behind me opened, quickly wiped the counter and moved away.

The sheriff of Staceyville was a small, immaculately uniformed man wearing a white hat. He took the stool next to me. “I hear you been asking a lot of questions, especially about Joey Lee.”

I put down my coffee. “I have not asked anyone at all about Joey Lee. On the contrary, ever since I set foot in this town, people have been asking *me*.”

He regarded me stonily. "You wouldn't be one of them private-eye investigators?"

"Do I look like a private investigator?"

"Nowadays you can't tell. They run from Mannix to Cannon. Just what is your line, Mister?"

I have a tendency to bristle when harassed. "I am an admiralty lawyer."

He was not at all convinced. "We got no water around here except for Lake Jubal A. Early and that's only twenty-six acres when it rains. Why did you come here, Mister?"

"I consider that my personal business and nothing short of a court order will unseal my lips. Am I the only stranger who's ever stopped in this delightful town?"

"Just about. For the last two years, anyway. Ever since Amtrak took away our daily train we been pretty isolated." He seemed to give that some dark thought and then frowned. "The situation don't make much difference to the men, but the women complain a lot."

He studied me for another moment, then turned and went back out into the night.

The counterman returned. "I guess I was the last person to see Joey Lee alive. Except maybe for . . ." He glanced significantly in the direction the sheriff had taken.

"Are you telling me that Joey Lee is dead?"

He shrugged elaborately. "There are some of us who think so. Joey Lee disappeared one week ago and there's nothing to show for it except the mud on the patrol car tires."

Mud on the patrol car tires? I was about to ask about that, but he continued.

"When a thing like this happens, it splits the town in two." He mulled that over. "Come to think of it, when *anything* happens, it splits the town in two. Anyway, half the people are in favor of keeping this thing quiet and local and the other half would like to bring it out into the open."

"Why don't they?"

"The sheriff's got a rotten temper and you hate to cross him. Especially in something like this." He leaned a bit closer. "You got a badge?"

I closed my eyes. "I am an admiralty lawyer."

He chuckled. "Just what is an admiralty lawyer supposed to do?"

"At present I am representing the last living survivor of the *Lady Diana* ship disaster of 1893."

"Of 1893? You mean it's been dragging through court for eighty-one years?"

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I smiled. "My dear fellow, if you knew anything at all about law; especially admiralty law, you would know that these things cannot be rushed." I glanced at my watch. It was nearly nine. "Am I being optimistic when I ask if there is a hotel in this town?"

"The Beauregard. Got lots of room these days. Rafe Covert owns it and he's a cousin of the sheriff, so don't let him give you the Ulysses S. Grant room. It's number 222."

I went back to where I'd parked my car and carried my suitcase the half block to the Beauregard. When I entered the lobby I had the distinct impression that everyone there knew about me, or thought he did.

The man behind the desk seemed a touch hostile as he watched me sign the register. He took a key off the board. "Your room number is 222."

I smiled generously. "I am psychologically allergic to the number 222. It is a long story and someday when I have more time, I will tell it to you. Another room, please."

Reluctantly he produced another tagged key.

My room appeared quite clean and comfortable. I turned on the TV set for half an hour and then went to bed.

In the morning, just as I finished dressing, there came a knock at my door.

I found a small, elderly woman in maid's uniform with sheets and pillowcases draped over her arm. "I come to change the bed linen."

She began stripping the bed. "I'll bet L.K. hired you."

"L.K. Williams?"

She nodded. "Do you think Joey Lee is still alive?"

"Why does everybody think that Joey Lee is dead?"

She slipped a pillow into a fresh pillowcase. "We're all concerned citizens—or at least half of us are—but we got to be careful what we say in front of the sheriff and his relatives. I guess I was the last person to see Joey Lee alive."

"I thought that distinction belonged to the counterman at the Staceyville Cafe?"

She sniffed. "Alex saw Joey Lee last at nine-thirty Monday night. I saw Joey Lee *and* the sheriff at nine-forty-five. Right behind the jailhouse. And they were arguing."

"About what?"

"I couldn't rightly make that out. They stopped when they saw me and didn't go to it again until I was well past. How do you like our town?"

"Charming."

She unfolded a sheet. "Staceyville is heaven for men and dogs,

but hell on women and horses. Ever since they took away our train, we women have been cut off from the world."

"Can't any of you drive automobiles?"

"We're mostly a one-car-per-family town. Have you ever tried to pry the car away from your husband just to take an innocent shopping trip to Montgomery?"

"Then you are isolated and desperate?"

"We got TV and the library's open Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, so that takes care of culture. But we're people who are isolated. If you don't get out and meet new people now and then you get provincial and inward-turning in your thoughts for the day."

When she was gone, I went to the window and looked down at Main Street. According to the information I'd gathered, Staceyville had—among other things—two drugstores, four cafe-restaurants, five churches, two doctors, three dentists, and one chiropractor.

There was another knock at the door.

This time I found a large young man, blue-jeaned and T-shirted. I gauged his age at the senior level in high school.

He glared at me menacingly. "Mister, I'd advise you to take the

first bus leaving Staceyville."

"Staceyville doesn't have a bus."

He flushed slightly. "I mean take your car. Anyway, leave town."

"Why?"

He flexed a conspicuous *biceps brachii*. "Because I say so."

I showed teeth. "I warn you, I have a brown belt in karate." Actually, however, I cannot distinguish a karate chop from a hi-bachi casserole.

He hesitated. "I got a white belt myself. My coach in Phys Ed says I'm pretty good."

I chuckled menacingly. "You must be aware that people with white belts simply do not mess around with people who possess the superior brown belts, except if they are heavily insured. Just what rash impulse brought you here?"

He shifted nervously from one foot to the other. "The sheriff is my uncle and he's been good to me, like at Christmas and birthdays. So I thought maybe I could help him out in his hour of need—no matter what he's done—by leaning on you a little."

"Did he send you here?"

"No. He doesn't know anything about it."

I shook my head sadly. "My dear young man, in your career of television viewing, have you ever

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seen any detective frightened out of town by threats or even by violence itself?"

He frowned in retrospect. "Now that I come to think of it . . ." He eyed his wristwatch with sudden discovery. "Gee, just look at that time. I got to get moving or I'll be late for chemistry class." He picked up a stack of books he had evidently deposited beside the door before knocking and quickly disappeared down the stairs.

I went out to the nearest restaurant for breakfast.

The waitress serving me had the name Billie Gee embroidered over her uniform pocket. She smiled. "Good morning, Mr. Collins."

I had never seen her before in my life.

She winked. "We don't see many admiralty lawyers around here."

"And I doubt that you will in the future."

"How do you like our town?"

"Interesting."

She shrugged. "It's heaven for men and dogs, but hell on women and horses."

I stared at her. "Do you have many horses around here?"

"Well, no. That was just an expression. But we got lots of women."

I glanced out of the window. The sheriff had parked his patrol

car across the street and now he stood beside it, ostentatiously inspecting his shotgun.

"The sheriff just loves hunting," Billie Gee said.

"What does he hunt?"

"Rabbits, mostly."

The sheriff noticed a dust mote on his otherwise spotless car and dusted it off with a handkerchief.

"The town lets the sheriff use the car for his own personal use too," Billie Gee said. "He takes real good care of it and he's never far from it." She smiled slyly. "Except for last Tuesday when he walked."

She took my order and departed.

When I finished eating and left the restaurant, the sheriff stopped me. "Who hired you?"

"How does L.K. Williams sound?"

"Don't give me that. It was somebody in town, wasn't it? Or maybe they formed a committee?" He glared down at three preschool children who gingerly sidled past him. "I know what everybody in town's thinking. But not a single one of them has got the guts to come right out and say it."

"Say what?"

"Never mind. I just don't want no outside interference."

I went on to the drugstore

a short distance down the street.

The proprietor scowled at me. "I'm not answering any of your questions. You'll get nothing out of me."

Another one of the sheriff's relatives?

"I just came in for some cigars."

He regarded me coldly. "All right. I'll tell you this and no more. Ask Randolph." He moved to the rear of the store.

"What about my cigars?"

He disappeared into a back room.

I sighed and bought cigars at the town's second drugstore where the clerk was friendly. I walked back down Main Street, past the courthouse square which featured a Civil War cannon, pointed north.

I went back up to my hotel room.

A chubby, beard-stubbled man sat on my bed. His suit was considerably off-white and his Panama somewhat crushed.

He ventured a smile. "The door was unlocked, so I just walked in when nobody answered my knock. Besides, I didn't want to be seen here by anybody. You never know who you can trust."

"Just who the devil are you?"

"I'm Randolph Wister." He ran his tongue over his lips. "You

don't happen to have a little drink around?"

"No. But I assume you have looked?"

He nodded. "I just thought you might have something on you."

"Sorry."

He philosophically accepted the situation. "You pay for valuable information, don't you?"

"I suppose you're going to tell me that you were the last person to see Joey Lee alive?"

"No. That was Mrs. Whittaker over at the hotel. But I seen something else."

I checked the contents of my suitcase. Nothing seemed to be missing.

"I was in the jailhouse Tuesday night," Randolph said. "That sort of thing happens now and then. Anyway, the sheriff put me in a cell to sleep it off."

I closed the suitcase and locked it.

Randolph continued. "I woke around seven Wednesday morning when I heard this water running just outside in back of the jailhouse. I looked out of my cell window and there was the sheriff washing his car down with a hose."

"He's never washed his car before?"

"I mean there was *mud* on the patrol car tires. Dried mud. How

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could he get mud on his tires when we haven't had any rain around here in two weeks?"

Randolph tried the glass of water on the night table. "On Monday night at nine-forty-five, Mrs. Whittaker saw the sheriff and Joey Lee arguing. That's the last anybody saw of Joey Lee. And then early Wednesday morning, the sheriff cleans mud off the tires of the patrol car."

"You seem to have skipped over Tuesday entirely."

"On Tuesday the sheriff was in town all day. Walking."

"Why should that be so significant?"

"When the sheriff arrested me on Tuesday night, he *walked* me to the jailhouse. When I asked him why I didn't get a ride like always, he just got mad and told me to shut up."

He put down the empty glass. "When I got out of jail I heard that Joey Lee was missing. I also heard that nobody saw the patrol car all day Tuesday. The sheriff was in town all right, but he tended to all of his business on foot. And when anybody asked him about the car, he'd get testy and say that it was in the garage being repaired. But there's only two garages in town and neither one of them did any work on the sheriff's car on Tuesday. Now why

would the sheriff lie about something like that unless he had something to hide?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Suppose that on Monday night the sheriff killed Joey Lee during that argument. Right off he didn't know what to do with the body, so he hid it in the trunk of the patrol car and left the car parked in his garage all day Tuesday while he was thinking it over. And then Tuesday night he got rid of the body. Now if I were looking for a body, the shores of Lake Jubal A. Early might be a good place to start. The water's receding because of the dry spell and the shores are muddy."

"If that is what you people suspect, why hasn't any one of you gone to the state authorities?"

"I guess everybody was waiting for somebody else to do something and nobody did. I suppose L.K. hired you?"

I picked up my suitcase. "No."

He frowned. "You leaving town?"

"Yes." I smiled, opened the door, and left.

On the way back to my car, I met the sheriff again. His eyes went to my suitcase. "You leaving town?"

"Yes. I've enjoyed your hospitality, but the time has come for me to move on. I have accom-

plished what I came here for."

I left him standing there, mouth slightly open.

I drove out of Staceyville, spent some time in both Newcourt and Portertown, and reached Cumberdale by three in the afternoon. My eyes took in the shops and stores and the window of the L.K. Williams Cafe.

I hesitated a moment, then parked and went inside. At this time of the day I was the only patron. I took one of the empty booths along the wall.

The waitress who came to take my order was a tall woman who seemed to be nursing a tragedy. She dabbed at red-rimmed eyes.

She stood about five-foot ten, had short brown hair, and a small scar below her left earlobe. I estimated she weighed a hefty one hundred and seventy pounds.

Yes, hefty.

A sudden, incredible thought came to me. "Are you Joey Lee Williams?"

She seemed a bit surprised at the recognition. "Joey is for Josephine. Like in Joey Heatherton, the famous actress whom I admire from afar. Williams is my maiden name, but I'm married now. Do I know you?"

"You've got all of Staceyville in a dither," I said. "Nobody knows what happened to you."

The mention of Staceyville brought forth new tears. When she managed to control herself, she was in a mood to talk. "It all started just because I took the car to Montgomery for a little shopping."

"That doesn't seem like such a heinous crime to me."

"To me either and I don't know why Clyde got so excited about it. After all, he has the town's permission to use the car for personal transportation too."

"Who's Clyde?"

"My husband. The sheriff in Staceyville."

I blinked. "You took the patrol car to Montgomery on a shopping trip?"

"Clyde hasn't chased anybody with it in months and I didn't think it would make any big difference if I borrowed it for just one day. But I couldn't make Clyde see it my way and we had a big argument."

"On Monday night? Behind the jailhouse?"

She nodded. "So Tuesday morning when Clyde was still asleep, I took the keys and just took off. I wore one of Clyde's caps and a dark coat and nobody thought anything of it, especially in Montgomery where they got women's lib."

She dabbed at her nose. "On

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the way home I had carburetor trouble and then I got stuck for a while in the mud on a town road in Autauga County. And what with one thing and another, I didn't get back home until well after midnight. Clyde was simply furious."

The memory was quite painful to her. "The things Clyde said relative to my intelligence were just awful. So I just phoned Daddy and he came and got me at three in the morning."

"Your husband *knows* you are here?"

She nodded. "And he hasn't phoned even once to apologize."

Obviously the sheriff was a prideful man who chose not to confide in anyone that his wife had, in effect, stolen the patrol car, gone to Montgomery on a shopping trip, and then left him.

He must have been aware that the town knew his wife was gone, but did he know that half of it—if not really all of the town—suspected that he had killed her?

I sighed. "Have you ever thought of doing the big thing by phoning your husband and telling him that you forgive him?"

She seemed to need only the slightest encouragement. "Do you

really think I ought to call him?"

"Of course. And besides, you can always hang up if he gets nasty again."

"I'll do it," she said emphatically. She left me abruptly and went to the public phone booth at the end of the room.

I watched as she got her number. She used her handkerchief profusely as she spoke, but from her general expression it appeared that she would soon be back in Staceyville with Clyde—a husband forgiving, if not forgetting.

I am not an admiralty lawyer. Neither am I a detective, private or otherwise.

I work for the South Central Bus Line and it is my job to survey possible new bus routes, especially in those areas no longer serviced by railroads.

Another waitress appeared to take my order. "How do you like Cumberdale?" she asked.

"Amusing."

She sighed. "It's heaven for men and dogs, but hell on women and horses. I haven't been to Montgomery in three months."

I made a note that in addition to Staceyville, Newcourt, and Portertown, I might just as well add Cumberdale to the new route.